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"Dragon-Ridden" Days: Yeats, Apocalypse, And The Anthropocene

Malcolm Sen

"You don't have to agree with trump [sic] but the
mob can't make me not love him.
We are both dragon energy."
Kanye West, Twitter, 2018[1]

Dragon Energy

Dragons, being imaginary creatures, escape the umbra of extinction shadowing multiple species on earth today. We can trace their lineage from Homer (at least in the European tradition) to the personal mount of Daenerys Targaryen, Drogon, in *Game of Thrones*; or, from *Beowulf* to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Because they are textual creatures, dragons display a resilience and capacity to mutate that makes them eloquent ontological signifiers in mythic narratives, as motifs of epistemological uncertainty in folklore and cultural memory, and as embodiments of extra-human/pre-modern intrusions in the workings of history. Whereas Chinese dragons are often beneficial to the human species, European variants (including those found in Celtic folklore) are not. Dragons spell death and destruction; they demand human sacrifices, as in the legend of St. George. Their appearance suggests power and menace of extraordinary dimensions, as in Lewis Carroll's Jabberwock. (The Jabberwock was first illustrated by John Tenniel in 1871 as a dragon, and the tradition continues well into the present day, in Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, for example.) Dragons collude with destructive forces; their power to annihilate everything that stands for "human" is unwittingly referred to in Kanye West's words above.[2] I suggest in this essay that the image of the dragon offers us a portal into the highly ornate symbolic structures of W. B. Yeats's historiography and his vision of the apocalyptic.

Two reasons prompt the focus of this study. The intellectual trajectory of literary criticism has long established the importance of symbolism in analyzing Yeats's poetry and drama, but it has not sufficiently paid attention to the symbol of the dragon. I concentrate on the phrase "now days are dragon-ridden" to read Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in ways that help

elucidate the dragon's crucial function in the poem. This also leads me to point out the contemporary "relevance" of the poem and the iconicity of the dragon that addresses the environmental tropes of the poem. Like many other Irish literary narratives, Yeats's prodigious output needs to be reevaluated using the tools supplied by the environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism.[3] Isolating the symbol of the dragon, I contend, reveals our contemporary vulnerability to ecological processes already set in motion by the time Yeats wrote and under whose shadow our futurity unconvincingly unfolds. Re-visiting this mythic creature from the precarious perspective of anthropogenic climate chaos is presentist, but unabashedly so. After all, our modern fetish with the medieval is a testament of a beastly modernity. The dragon, I argue in this essay, leads us into the ontological and epistemological realms that haunt the merging of history and geology at this present time, a conflation that ultimately gives rise to the concept of the Anthropocene. This essay conceptualizes how we might view the intrusion of the dragon in Yeats's poetic rendition of history at a time when humans are not only historical subjects but also geological agents.[4] To view the dragon in this manner is to realize that Yeats's apocalypse proleptically comments on our Anthropocene.

For a poet as fascinated with the idea of apocalypse as Yeats was, the awe-inspiring atavism embodied by the dragon seemed especially alluring. In his early career the creature is ironically anthropomorphized, a symbolic stand-in for the empiricists who challenge the romantic sensibility of poets, as in "The Realists," a poem that appears in the collection *Responsibilities*.

> What can books of men that wive
> In a dragon-guarded land,
> Paintings of the dolphin-drawn
> Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons
> Do, but awake a hope to live
> That had gone
> With the dragons? (*VP* 309, *ll* 2–8)

Here, the dragon is a monstrous metaphor for the realists who enervate artistic vision; they are antithetical to the fairyland romanticism suggested by dolphins and "Sea-nymphs." Later in life and after a prestigious public career, Yeats's introspective poems in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* of the 1930s see the dragon animated as a symbol of self-limiting delusions—an erector of unnecessary boundaries in the section "Her Triumph," in "A Woman Young and Old:"

> I did the dragon's will until you came
> Because I had fancied love a casual

> Improvisation, or a settled game […]
> And then you stood among the dragon-rings.
> I mocked, being crazy, but you mastered it
> And broke the chain and set my ankles free. (*VP* 533, *ll* 1–9)

In this poem the dragon is susceptible to human agency, vanquished by an ingenuity of Odyssean dimensions. The poem is a reversal of Yeats's earlier stance in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," where he chastises "dragonish women like Con Markiewiwicz" (the phrase is Daniel Albright's) who ruin themselves through education:[5]

> Opinion is not worth a rush;
> In this altar-piece the knight,
> Who grips his long spear so to push
> That dragon through the fading light,
> Loved the lady; and it's plain
> The half-dead dragon was her thought,
> That every morning rose again
> And dug its claws and shrieked and fought. (*VP* 385, *ll* 1–8)

If dragons are mutable creatures, then Yeats's poetry supplies ample examples of this genetic propensity. However, whereas the dragon can only annihilate symbolically, our period of multi-species extinctions is not textual but increasingly biopolitical.

Perhaps the most apocalyptic image of the dragon in Yeats's poetry occurs in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." In the lines quoted below the annihilating force of dragons is not only more acute than previous iterations of this image but is also presented as antithetical to an orderly world.

> Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
> Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
> Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
> To crawl in her own blood, and go scott-free;
> The night can sweat with terror as before
> We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
> And planned to bring the world under rule,
> Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (*VP* 429, *ll* 25–32)

The dragon is a cataclysmic force in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"—a pathological infection of existential proportions, seeking the death of "the mother," as if to erase the possibility of generational propagation. Its toxicity, implied by "Now days are dragon-ridden," infects at an individual level too and produces a delirious vocabulary of the subconscious: "the nightmare /

Rides upon sleep." The dragon is this nightmare and its contagious intrusion affects Time itself: the night sweats with terror. As is clear, the deployment of this image operates at a number of levels in this poem that demands that we further unpack the traditional suggestion that the dragon is representative of Yeats's conceptualization of apocalypse. I concentrate here on the pathology of the dragon in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and the ecology of the poem to demonstrate how the conceptualization of the socio-political and temporal aspects of this apocalypse and the understanding of the "world" posited by Yeats can be viewed from a twenty-first century perspective. Concentrating on Yeats's image of the dragon allows us to understand the poem's ecology, that is the web-work through which violence and apocalypse, art and politics, is constructed. My main contention here is that the dragon proleptically anticipates dominant questions of human culpability and vulnerability associated with the Anthropocene. It makes sense to ask what the apocalypse, depicted in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" through "dragon-ridden" days, might mean in 2019. The original title of the poem, "Thoughts upon the Present State of the World," uncannily appeals to future generations to ask exactly such a question. As Michael Woods proclaims in his book-length study of the poem, the "Now" preceding "days are dragon-ridden" is interminably contemporaneous: "What's interesting about now is how it shifts in time; and how it is never without a then."[6] Yeats, who once declared that "I took satisfaction in certain public disasters, felt sort of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin," made apocalyptic ends a recurrent feature of his poetry.[7] "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," in this regard, is clearly a progenitor of "The Second Coming," a poem that was actually written in 1919. The Sphinx-like "rough beast" of "The Second Coming" gains wings in the later poem—the contagion is air-borne and all-encompassing—as if what was forecast has come to pass. What arrives after the apocalypse is the subject of this essay.

Historical Endings

In Yeats's philosophy of history the cyclic movement of epochs held extinction at bay, so that "death was both contemplated and overcome." The historical structure alluded to in the line "We pieced our thoughts into philosophy" is a contracted version that *A Vision* expands in greater detail: "What if every two thousand and odd years something happens in the world to make one sacred, the other secular; one wise, the other foolish; one fair, the other foul; one divine, the other devilish?" (*CW14* 22). In such a historical method the apocalypse is a temporal inconvenience, which offers a future potential for renewal of the species. If apocalypses reveal some hitherto hidden knowledge, as the

Greek root of the word clarifies, Yeats's conceptualizations of such destruction reveal the birth of a new geopolitical order. As Seamus Deane notes:

> But Yeats's world and that of the Romantic movement in general is not really quite so different from its bourgeois counterpart as it would have liked to be. Neither world will yield to the fact of extinction; each preserves, in different ways, belief in the eternity of the world and in the eternity of consciousness. Both are rooted in the fear of death.[8]

However, it is the very reincarnation of history, "the most fervently held of all Yeats's private beliefs," that is under scrutiny today.[9] The Anthropocene is not a period of visually stimulating, instantaneous disaster; rather, its stratigraphic and atmospheric layers are etched over time, through a slow accretion of ecological violence affecting both human and non-human nature.[10] The naming of our geological epoch also signals the slow death of the human, the extinction of the *anthropos*, since all geological timescales mark both a beginning and an end. How to narrate that which annihilates the human subject altogether? When Yeats contemplates the apocalypse he imagines the end of a social order, especially the death of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy—not necessarily of the world. In our time there is no re-birth foretold at the end of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene marks the end of the world (itself a human cultural construct) but, to be clear, not the end of the planet (the spatial body which remains caught in a gravitational ellipsis around the sun, at least for the next five billion years). It is little wonder that the Anthropocene has been called an "an intellectual behemoth;" for these reasons it is significantly more complex and thus more resistant to textual representation than the apocalypse.

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is often read in conjunction with overtly political poems such as "September 1913" or "Easter 1916" for good reason. The stanza quoted above directly refers to the death of Eileen Quinn, a pregnant mother of three, who was "shot dead [...] with her child in her arms," by Black and Tan soldiers. The story, as is well known, was recorded by Lady Augusta Gregory in her journal. But the publication history and the thematic progression of "Nineteen Hundred Nineteen" suggests that, although Yeats may have been responding to the Anglo-Irish War, he was also interested in a universalist, historiographical commentary on modernity.[11] The fact that Lady Gregory's notes on the murder of Eileen Quinn by the ex-military soldiers do not occur until 1920 bears further testimony to this. The title of the poem therefore becomes a synecdochal shorthand; the Anglo-Irish War that it points to in turn becomes a concentrated example of a universal pattern of colonial and nationalist violence.

Helen Vendler contends in her reading of "The Second Coming" that "Unlike the canonical Apocalypse, the Modernist apocalyptic utterance is not certain of its visions."[12] This is borne out by the last lines of "The Second Coming," which begin with certitude but end with bewilderment: "I know / That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle" that ends with a question, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (*VP* 402, *ll* 21–22). Vendler notes that "The non-parallel syntax shows that the poet's knowledge is limited. He is convinced that a new force is imminent, for which the cosmic cradle has been set rocking; yet what sort of beast it will be is as yet undetermined."[13] "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is radically different in this regard: it not only identifies the beast that is born but also catalogues the wave of destruction in its wake.

When Yeats casts his "dragon-ridden" days in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" he also demonstrates language's capacity to outlast the apocalypse, to bear witness and record the present. The first section of the poem provides such a litany, chronicling the "ingenious lovely things" that are now no more. In an overtly bourgeois rendition of loss, Yeats catalogues "Amid the ornamental bronze and stone / An ancient image made of olive wood — / And gone are Phidias' famous ivories / And all the golden grasshoppers and bees" (*VP* 428, *ll* 5–8). These symbols of human creativity stand in opposition to the destructive forces of political violence that Yeats was witnessing first-hand in the second decade of the twentieth-century in Ireland. The death of Irish soldiers in the First World War, among whom was Lady Gregory's son Robert, the violence of the Easter Rebellion in 1916, and the political strife following the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, all indicated to Yeats the ending of an era. Although "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is not simply a political poem, it is from politics that the violence emanates: "Public opinion ripening for so long / We thought it would outlive all future days. / O what fine thought we had because we thought / That the worst rogues and rascals had died out" (*VP* 428, *ll* 13–16). In this sense Yeats's futurology in "The Second Coming" transmutes to a historian's record-keeping skill in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." History becomes akin to a ransacked museum, Art is commoditized:

> But is there any comfort to be found?
> Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
> What more is there to say? that country round
> None dared admit, if such a thought were his,
> Incendiary or bigot could be found
> To burn that stump on the Acropolis,
> Or break in bits the famous ivories
> Or traffic in the grasshoppers or bees. (*VP* 429, *ll* 41–48)

It is important to notice that Yeats's Modernist aesthetics reveals a post-apocalyptic worldview that does not foretell the end of the world per se but the end of a specific worldview and a way of life. The end of the classical age and the arrival of violent modernity as apocalypse proleptically anticipates a common trope of contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives. In our time the apocalypse is not the end of the world but the end of the First World way of life; that is, the return of industrialized nations to a medieval condition where the infrastructure of modernity has crumbled. Yeats's timescale is more dense in this regard: he speaks of the death of the classical age and the arrival of modernity as a return of the so-called dark ages. The medievalism first suggested in the long first section of the poem through the image of the dragon mirrors "a dragon of air" in section two:

> When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
> A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
> It seemed that a dragon of air
> Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
> Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead;
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (*VP* 430, *ll* 49–58)

Yeats changes Fuller's "danse serpentine" to a "dragon of air;" the beautiful symmetry of his historical design is enmeshed in an arachnid web, "enwound" and "whirled," to return us to the old ways.[14] As Woods remarks, "It's telling that the new should go and the old come back, rather than the old finally giving place to the new, so the magical circuits are at least good for an angry paradox."[15] That paradox is embodied not by the scales of justice, "right and wrong," but by the scales of the dragon, the intrusive and destructive return of the medieval in the modern. Yeats's litany of loss, his depiction of the transmutation of aesthetics into commodity fetishism, of humanity being engulfed by a dragon, tells of the death of philosophy that had attempted to "bring the world under a rule." In the third movement of the poem, the utopian vision is nostalgically remembered: "O but we dreamed to mend / Whatever mischief seemed / To afflict mankind, but now / That winds of winter blow / Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed" (*VP* 431, *ll* 84–88). Here, the corporeal violence is acute, but "crack-pated" also uncannily suggests that the dream originates from a catatonic or a posthumous condition.

Critical focus on Yeats's representation of violence and apocalypse, much like its approach to Yeats's draconic symbolism, rarely unpacks the multilayered

aspects of these dense terms. At a time of climate chaos those terms do not appear as simple rhetorical tools but rather resonate with contemporaneity. How might we approach Yeats's apocalypse anew? One way to do this is to identify what distinguishes the apocalypse from the Anthropocene. Here, we will recognize that while language survives the apocalyptic event, it does not outlast the Anthropocene. Claire Colebrook writes that "The twenty-first century is at once and the same time marked by a sense of impending human extinction (both literally, with the biological species coming to an end, and figuratively, with all that passes itself off as human facing annihilation by way of technological, ecological and political catastrophe)..."[16] Among the signifiers of the "human" facing extinction, language especially stands out because it is through language that the "world" is created. There is no post-apocalyptic ability to record the demise of the Anthropocene and narrate the progression of the next geological epoch. Here, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and the species narratives that form its vocabulary, is informative because it anticipates the temporal incertitude and linguistic challenges of narrating and comprehending the scale of contemporary extinction. Yeats imagines the return of the medieval as the normative condition of the modern, thus bearing testimony to the fact that, if this is the apocalypse, it is impossible to speak of it without being post-apocalyptic. The apocalypse and the Anthropocene are thus radically different in their conceptual import: the former promotes a paradoxical condition of naming that which has already passed, and the latter is a process of passing whose end-point is the death of the human, of language, and the world. The Anthropocene names our geological epoch as the "Age of Human" but at the same time spells the death of that apex species and its world. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" thus helps us visualize the tense relationship between that which has already passed and that which has yet to occur.

Michael Wood cites Frank Kermode's assessment of Yeats's poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" to describe the pleasures of reading "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen:" "It is a poem worthy of much painful reading."[17] The latter poem is, as I am contending here, especially worthy of being analyzed in a contemporary frame. In 2017, at a talk delivered at the Yeats International Summer School, Fintan O'Toole noted that:

> There are many ways to measure the world and economists, ecologists and anthropologists labour mightily over them. I suggested another one: the Yeats Test. The proposition is simple: the more quotable Yeats seems to commentators and politicians, the worse things are. As a counter-example we might try the Heaney Test: if hope and history rhyme, let the good times roll. But these days, it is the older Irish poet who prevails in political discourse—and that is not good news.[18]

While Yeats's phantasmagoric vocabulary has resurfaced in the public sphere since 2016—from *The Wall Street Journal* to Twitter and everywhere else in between—the resurrection has been read as a result of the geopolitical uncertainties in a post-Trumpian and post-Brexit world. Political discourse is a cornerstone of Yeats's poetry and at times, art is synonymous with politics, as in the poem under consideration here: "A man in his own meditation / Is lost in the labyrinth that he has made / In art *or* politics" (*VP* 431, *ll* 69–71, emphasis mine). But Yeats's political themes are also the reason why ecological and environmental motifs in his poetry matter a great deal. As Bruno Latour's recent exhortation reminds us, bringing us down to earth is the contemporary task of politics.[19] The separation of nature from culture—or of ecology from economy, of history from geology — is a product of a modernity whose end-point has been extractive capitalism, alarming levels of resource depletion, unprecedented species extinctions, and financialized capital's novel methods of selling servitude. The metabolism of modernity parasitically digests its host, and the vulnerability of ecosystems mirrors the fragile territorial politics of 2019. It is now increasingly clear that ecological degradation and resultant geopolitical transformations lead to the "crisis ordinariness"—to use Lauren Berlant's phrase—of contemporary politics. This is a period when honor and truth, the two moral signifiers in section four of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," can truly be considered politically obsolete, "for we / Traffic in mockery" (*VP* 432, *ll* 111–12).

Rather than focusing on Yeats's relevance to contemporary geopolitics I am proposing that Yeats provides us with conceptual tools to understand the enormous scale of our geological present. Yeats's planetary scope, cosmological timeframes, and his interest in non-human, naturalistic imagery, allow us to unearth some crucial epistemological questions about non-human nature, artistic representations of the nonhuman world, and history's co-evolution with ecology. As Christophe Bonneuil writes, "To see the Anthropocene as an event rather than a thing means taking history seriously and learning to work with the natural sciences, without becoming mere chroniclers of a natural history of interactions between the human species and the Earth system." Yeats, especially in his later poetry, demands such a felicity with what is often considered to be outside the purview of the literary critic or the historian. A central component of the interdisciplinary work in our field is to recognize the rhetorical imbrication of human nature with non-human nature within our representative systems that might help us forge what is of utmost importance: "new narratives for the Anthropocene and thus new imaginaries."[20] The present state of climate chaos, apart from being the product of industrialization and late modernity, also reveals a conceptual problem of harnessing the multi-scalar, multi-generational nature of ecological degradation causally

linked to human history. The naming of the Anthropocene serves to bring the planetary and existential scope of such degradation and the imbrication of the human within "nature."

Earthly Extinctions

The only rule that outlasts the machinations of history in Yeats's poem is the geometry of planetary paths, suggested by the "Platonic year."[21] Indeed, the orbital trajectories of planetary bodies is a key component of his philosophy of history. This planetary vision recurs in Yeats's later poetry. Marjorie Howes has pointed out that Yeats opens "The Second Coming" with the impersonal stance of an epic viewer-from-above of the entire earth: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." She further argues that, "One Yeatsian map would show the whole earth from space. It would cast Ireland, or certain elements of Irish culture, as just one point of access among many to the eternal truths, beauties, or conflicts whose essences were constant throughout the world."[22] A similar logic is at play in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Yeats's conflation of a planetary framework with history certainly demands the rectifying lenses of postcolonial and race studies, but his grand, wide-angled, and simultaneously microscopic scrutiny is also instructive of the kind of scalar thinking required in the Anthropocene. The epic scope of the visual economy of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" depends on the image of the dragon.

We might approach this by engaging the ecology of this poem. The entanglement of history with planetary ecology suggests that history evolves within and through the assemblages of accelerated biodiversity loss and multispecies extinctions that directly affect the continuity of our species. Elizabeth DeLoughrey contends that "Due to their enormous scales and their discursive histories, the figures of nonhuman nature, the human, Earth, and now the Anthropocene share a universalizing geologic."[23] Here, Yeats's suggestion that history can be apprehended through nature demands some elaboration. The naturalistic symbolism of early poems, such as the "bee-loud glade" in the pastoral "Lake Isle of Innisfree," turns into artifice in this poem. The animal imagery of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" further conflates the human and the animal; for example, the appearance of a solitary soul cast as a swan in section three. Yeats's menagerie affords a special place to avian symbolism, from the Orientalized peacocks and peahens in the early poems to the swan and other birds in his later works. They help us understand, for example, key political poems such as "Easter 1916."[24] "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" also ends with avian imagery: "Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks," which stand in opposition to the opening stanza's "golden grasshoppers and bees."

Nonetheless, the winged creature that allows a truly hemispheric perspective from which to view the planetary chaos unfolding in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is the mythical dragon; the "violence of horses" at the end of the poem is instigated by the pathological fear instilled by "dragon-ridden" days in the opening. The structure of the poem also suggests a growing perspectival resolution; from space to place, from the heady depths of philosophical rumination, subconscious nightmares, and the airborne dragon, Yeats brings us down to earth in the final stanza: "Violence upon the roads."

Dragons, however, can be airborne or reside in oceanic and subterranean depths, as contemporaries of Yeats's pointed out. Standish O'Grady, in his translation of *Acallam na Senórach* (Colloquy with the Ancients), supplies us with the reason why the Fianna, despite having banished all monsters out of Ireland, did not kill "the reptile" in the glen of Ros Enaigh.[25] In O'Grady's re-telling, Cáilte replies, "Their reason was that the creature is the fourth part of Mesgedhra's brain, which the earth swallowed there and converted into a monstrous worm."[26] Apart from many other strange and wonderful things the *Acallam na Senórach*, one of the most important tales of the Fenian cycle, also narrates the figure of the serpent, or the monstrous worm, whose refuge is deep underground and who is an offshoot of the fossilized/preserved brain of an ancient king of Leinster. The magic realism of this text allows Oisín and Caílte to speak to Saint Patrick, who finally banishes serpents from Ireland. In Celtic mythology, as in many other cultural traditions, reptiles, serpents, and dragons share a fluid relationship, appearing sometimes from the bowels of the earth, at others arising from oceanic depths, or plunging from the sky, earthbound. Dragons encompass the stratigraphic, aqueous, and atmospheric realms of this planet; the world of the Celtic Revival could not escape their rhetorical power.[27] These oceanic and topographical signifiers focus our attention on Yeats's draconic symbolism in a way that might *naturalize* the dragon from myth into history. If the dragon can help us approach key epistemological and ontological questions related to the Anthropocene, as I suggest in my opening remarks, it does so through an intellectual lineage in which extinction features prominently. The dragon defies death itself but simultaneously speaks to our contemporary time of escalating extinctions. A recent study by the anthropologist David Jones argues that tales surrounding dragons, which span cultures and nations, originates from a primal fear of snakes, eagles, and panthers. This fear, as Jones argues, is a genetically in-built response encoded in our evolutionary history. It is understandable why the dragon thus becomes an archetypal signifier of humanity's destruction in numerous texts. A corollary argument explains the predominance of draconic imagery in world cultures by proposing that these myths were narrative attempts by our ancestors to rationalize the sighting of fossilized remains of large predators, such as dinosaurs. What

both these theoretical strands share in common is the theme of extinction, whether imagined (as in the first instance) or real (as in the second example). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the discourse surrounding the ecological concept of extinction troubled the species narratives that a Christian worldview had promulgated. If God had created the world, how could he allow something as self-negating as biological extinction? As Ursula Heise writes:

> Most life forms that have ever existed—over 99 percent, according to some scientists—are extinct. Extinction is, therefore, one of the most basic characteristics of the planet's ecology. Species disappear because they change through gradual adaptation to such a degree that they can no longer be considered the same species, or because all individuals die off before they can reproduce.[28]

When Richard Owens "discovered" and named dinosaur fossils in 1842, he helped gain traction for both evolutionary theory and extinction as a biological fallout of evolutional history. Extinction finally seemed not an anomaly but a process which reflected the natural order of things. The so-called background rate of extinction—a rate of normal extinctions of species—reflected processes of natural selection, adaptation, or inability thereof, towards changing ecological scenarios such as habitat loss. However, this normality appears to be in a distant past in the Anthropocene, which among other catastrophes narrates a hundred-fold increase in extinction levels among vertebrate and plant species. The situation is dire enough that the otherwise staid tone of the *Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* was recently undercut by renowned scientists who titled their groundbreaking paper on contemporary extinction levels with these opening words: "Biological Annihilation." In the article the authors go on to prove how "Dwindling population sizes and range shrinkages [of vertebrates] amount to a massive anthropogenic erosion of biodiversity and of the ecosystem services essential to civilization."[29] There are numerous other such reports; for example, "Humans have driven nearly 600 plant species to extinction since 1750s," runs the title of a recent article in the *New Scientist*.[30]

If, as has been proposed, one of the markers of the Anthropocene is an irradiated planet after the first nuclear tests were carried out in the 1940s, then mass extinctions have become an ontological signifier of this geological epoch in the twenty-first century. Dragons, in this scheme of things, are avatars of dinosaurs, the iconic species of the extinction narrative (although subversively, they do not die out themselves). Dragons emerge in the contemporary moment from the abyssal depths of modernity not through biological adaptation or resilience, but because of their archetypal alterity; they are an iconic reminder of existential ends and the slow violence of species extinction. Thus,

their wrathful presence in twentieth-century literature needs to be historicized through an environmental lens so that dragons are not simply signifiers of evil and myth, cordoned off into the realms of fantasy, but reincarnated as synecdochal signifiers of the Anthropocene. They remind us of fossilized pasts and chthonic ends, the lithic layers that humanity compacts itself into in the geological scheme of modern times.

Thus, in 2019, we might read Yeats's incantation of the dragon as an unwitting but timely reminder of the adjacency of our future end as a species. It is fitting that "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," written as a bitter cry against the fall of an aristocratic past and as a response to unfolding crises of state-formation, demands to be a commentary on the present state of the world. At this time when biology and politics, philosophy and ecology, history and geology merge, the dragon emerges as a figure of clarifying alterity. The phrase "dragon-ridden" needs no further elaboration for poetic import: it is already malevolent. As an amalgamation of mythic rationalizations of mega fauna fossils, religious cosmology, and a shorthand for the genetically-induced human fear of large predators, perhaps the dragon can never go extinct. Its plastic popularity in modernity, along with its ability to transgress the magical possibilities of fable and enter the historical mode, makes it, as Donna Haraway writes in a not dissimilar context, "outside the security checkpoint of bright reason." The dragon is an ideal figure of otherness with "a remarkable capacity to induce panic in the centers of power and self certainty."[31]

The question that remains unresolved is this: if the dragon is the figure of the other, and if it is an uncanny image of the Anthropocene, the past resurrected to hurtle us into a precarious future, then is it human or beast? Yeats circumnavigates the planetary and the particulate in the final section of this poem; as "evil gathers head," "dusty wind" engulfs the tableau of destruction. Like his former exercises of draconic imagery Yeats anthropomorphizes the dragon in the figure of "Robert Artisson"—apart from the dragon, the only other actively evil subject in the poem—whom he calls an "insolent fiend." Even Lady Kyteler, the medieval "witch," is cast as "love-lorn," and not really malevolent at all. Following the same uncanny logic, we recognize that Artisson is no human either. He "lurches past, his great eyes without thought," much like the slouching beast of "The Second Coming." If *our* days are "dragon-ridden," it is because we live "Under the shadow" of Artisson's "stupid straw-pale locks." The totemic items of the "Bronzed peacock feathers" and the "red combs of cocks," ritualistically given to Artisson, feed the *anthropos* who destroys the human and the world.

Notes

1. Kanye West (@KanyeWest), "You don't have to agree with trump […]," Twitter, April 25, 2018, https://twitter.com/kanyewest/status/989179757651574784?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E989225812166696960&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fmusic%2F2018%2Fapr%2F25%2Fkanye-west-donald-trump-dragon-energy
2. Thanks are due to Jason Moralee for reminding me of Kanye West's tweet.
3. My forthcoming studies chart such a critical trajectory in detail. In the meantime, see Sharae Deckard, ed., "Food, Energy, Climate: Irish Culture and World-Ecology," *Irish University Review* 49, no.1 (May 2019) and Derek Gladwin, *Contentious Terrains: Boglands, Ireland, Postcolonial Gothic* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016).
4. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222.
5. W B Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, [1990] 1999), 604.
6. Michael Woods, *Yeats and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.
7. Cited in Marjorie Garber, *Loaded Words* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 185.
8. Seamus Deane, "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution," in *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber & Faber 1985), rep. in ed. Jonathan Allison, *Yeats's Political Identities* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1996), 136.
9. Deane, "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution," 136.
10. See Robert Nixon, *Slow Violence: The Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
11. See Toby Foshay, "Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen': Chronology, Chronography and Chronic Misreading," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 100–08.
12. Helen Vendler, "The Later Poetry," in eds. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly, The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80.
13. Helen Vendler, "The Late Poetry," 80.
14. To see the Lumière Brothers's 1896 cinematic rendition of Loie Fuller's Danse Serpentine, visit https://youtu.be/YNZ4WCFJGPc
15. Michael Woods, *Yeats and Violence*, 52.
16. Colebrook, "Extinction," 151.
17. Michael Woods, *Yeats and Violence*, 6.
18 Fintan O'Toole, "'Yeats Test' Criteria Reveal We Are Doomed," *Irish Times* (Dublin) July 28, 2018, https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-yeats-test-criteria-reveal-we-are-doomed-1.3576078.
19. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).
20. Christophe Bonneuil, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017), xiii.
21. For a comprehensive explanation of "The Platonic Year," also known as "The Great Year," see Michael Woods, *Yeats and Violence*, 53–54.
22. Marjorie Howes, "Yeats and the Postcolonial," in Majorie Howes and John Kelly, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 210.
23. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Pres, 2019), 2.
24. See Lucy McDiarmid's "The Avian Rising: Yeats, Muldoon, and Others," *International Yeats Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016), https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss1/10. See also Nicholas Grene, Yeats's Poetic Codes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 104–129.

25. The Colloquy with the Ancients, trans. Standish Hayes O'Grady, Medieval Irish series (Cambridge, Ont.: In parentheses, 1999), 67; see http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/colloquy_ogrady.pdf.
26. *The Colloquy with the Ancients*, 67.
27. For example, another contemporary of Yeats, John Millington Synge, ethnographically narrates stories of ominous sightings of sea monsters by Aran Island villagers. John Francis Campbell suggests a link between Synge's sea monsters and dragons in Campbell, *The Celtic Dragon Myth*, trans. George Henderson, reprint edn. (Felinfach Lampeter: Llanerch, 1995).
28. Ursula Heise, "Extinction," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, eds. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 118.
29. Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, "Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines,"in *Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114, no. 30 (July 25, 2017), E6089.
30. Adam Vaughn, "Humans Have Driven Nearly 600 Plant Species to Extinction since 1750s," *NewScientist* (June 10, 2019), https://www.newscientist.com/article/2205949-humans-have-driven-nearly-600-plant-species-to-extinction-since-1750s/.
31. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10.